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## Cultural and Semiotic Strategies of Constructing Indigenous Northern Ethnicity in Art (Based on the Yakut Art School)

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*The article studies cultural and semiotic strategies of constructing indigenous Northern ethnicity in art on the basis of the Yakut art school development research and analysis of paintings by artists of the school. It defines peculiarities of each period of the Yakut art formation, reveals the trends of national school development within the stream of common art history. It suggests authorial systematization of paintings by the Yakut artists. Works are grouped by themes. These are paintings, the cultural and semiotic forms of which reveal the spiritual world view of the Yakut; pieces representing the concept of way, the road of life a human walks along; portraits, the visual appearances of which represent certain types of cultural heroes; still lives, representing the most significant items of the Yakut culture. It outlines the development vector of the modern Yakut art, which is the tendency for re-consideration and adaptation of the ethnic memory of the nation for the new globalized world context.*

*Keywords: cultural and semiotic strategies, construction, indigenous Northern ethnicity, national art, Yakut painting, Yakut artists, Yakut art school, ethnocultural values.*

*Research area: culture studies, art history.*

### 1. Introduction

The question of ethnical diversity of the society and settlement of international relations takes up a significant place in the modern national policy agenda. In these issues a great role is played by local authorities running regional programs on carrying out multiple events intended to boost national development and expand intercultural cooperation between the peoples resident in the Russian Federation. The most urgent are the projects targeted at symbolic reproduction of ethnical identity of various ethnical group members. Today, the practice of

celebrating national holidays, making television coverage on ethnical topics are becoming more and more popular. Such practices make up actual themes for scientific researches, while symbolic “field” (P. Bourdieu) of the national art, and the Yakut art school in particular, remains unstudied in the context of ethnic theme construction. We may mention a series of works, dedicated to the analysis of ethnofuturism as a trend of modern art (Gartig, 2006; Matochkin, 2009; Nekhviadovich, 2010; Pavlova, 2007). Among researchers of the Yakut painting we should remark Potapov I.A., who wrote the fundamental works which

now make a base for modern researches by: Borisova A.A., Zlatkevich L.L., Kuz'mina L.A., Chervonnaia S.M., Lutsenko Iu.V., Timofeeva V.V. and others. Dissertations by Vlada Vladislavovna Timofeeva "World View in Painting and Graphics of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's Yakutia" (2006) and Iuliia Vladimirovna Lutsenko "Artistic and Aesthetic Self-Conscience of the Yakut Painters at the Turn of Centuries" (2009) are especially outstanding.

Dissertation by Timofeeva V.V. "World View in Painting and Graphics of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's Yakutia" is based on the comparative historical approach to art work analysis. The author studies motives and appearances, common both for professional art and folk culture, analyzing painting and graphics by the Yakut artists created from the 1920-s to 1990-s.

Dissertation by Lutsenko Iu.V. "Artistic and Aesthetic Self-Conscience of the Yakut Painters at the Turn of Centuries" was the first one dedicated to the ethnical aspect in the Yakut culture. The dissertation is based on painting and graphics by the Yakut artists. The major attention of the author is concentrated on revealing peculiar features of ethnonational artistic and aesthetic conscience of the artists. According to the author, this topic is especially urgent at the beginning of the new millennium, as during the last years both creators and recipients of art have greatly changed, while the forms of art and their presentation have also gone through a great transformation.

The objective of the present research is to analyze cultural and semiotic strategies of constructing indigenous Northern ethnicity in art based on the analysis of the Yakut painting development and of paintings by artists from the Sakha Republic.

The research is based on methodological principles of the cultural and semiotic approach, developed by such scholars, as J.C. Alexander, F.C. Smith, C.J. Geertz, Yu.M. Lotman, G.N. Lola, E.A. Orlova, C.S. Pierce. Constructivist ideas

by such theorists as P. Bourdieu, F. Barth, V.S. Malakhov, V.A. Tishkov and others were considered in formulating the author's concept of art, composing the fundament of this research. We suggest regarding art as a cultural and semiotic construct, creating social senses in individual and collective consciences. As a secondary constructing system, art actualizes existing and functioning primary constructs, embodying ethnocultural values, in its cultural and semiotic forms (Koptseva, Seredkina, 2013).

The work uses both theoretic and empiric methods. It is the analysis of scientific literature on social philosophy, social anthropology, culturology and art criticism, dedicated to the present topic. Among the most actively used methods there are: observation, analysis, interpretation of the Yakut visual art works.

## 2. The Yakut visual art development dynamics

The objective of this paragraph is to analyze the development dynamics of the Yakut visual art as one of the most distinctive ethnical art schools.

The Yakut art school development may be described as three stages. At the first stage (**late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries**) the Yakut visual art was mostly based on Russian icon-painting school traditions. It is known that back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the North of Russia the so-called Zaonezhskaya icon-painting school was founded. The school developed Novgorod icon-painting traditions in the local environment (Zhukovsky, 2007). According to historical data, it was also in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the first contact of the Yakut with Russians was registered. At the same time, the Yakut lands were joined to Russia.

As a consequence of such processes that happened between two absolutely different ethnicities, Christianity began to spread among local Yakut population. From this time, the Yakut

people began to absorb Russian culture; in other words, the it was the beginning of assimilation with Russian population. Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Khangalaassky Ulus of Yakutia a great number of churches was built. Consider that until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Christianity in Yakutia was preached by mostly Russian residents. As a rule, churches in the Yakut fortresses (or “ostrogs”) were built for Russian people. This is why at first in Yakutia only imported Russian icon paintings were common, and later, starting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, new iconic paintings, created by both local Yakut and Russian painters, began to appear. This phenomenon witnesses the process of penetration of another culture’s world outlook into the Yakut culture, which, in this case, was that of Russians.

What was adopted? First of all, the icon painting themes: Theophany, along with other iconographic patterns, such as “Tender Feeling” and “the Sign”, known in several variants in Russia. The most distinctive icons of the mentioned iconographic patterns in the art of Ancient Russia are the front face of “Our Lady of the Don” (approx. 1392) and “Our Lady Panhagia” (first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century). Joint work of the Russian and Yakut masters is also known for the green background icons. Painting such icon backgrounds was peculiar both for Novgorod and Moscow schools of icon painting. Studying the specificity of icons displayed at the Yakut museums, the first thing that meets the eye is the transformation of composition in placing the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus within the icon space. In the Yakut icons the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus are depicted as a mirror reflection of the Old Russian icon “Our Lady of the Don”, typical of Moscow icon painting school, Theophanes the Greek or other painters of his circle (exact authorship of the icon is still unknown) in particular. Moreover, the Yakut masters introduce some changes into the Tender

Feeling icon painting pattern as well. Thus, the Virgin Mary and the Baby are depicted distant from each other: there is a visual separation line between them. The hands of the Virgin Mary are supporting the body of Jesus Christ, at the same time pushing Him apart from Her. Thereby, He is portrayed as ready to enter the world for salvation. There is no doubt that the presence of the Yakut masters in icon painting process is also manifested in the desire of the painters to convey the autochthonous ethnic features in the face of the Virgin Mary.

This way the starting point of the Yakut painting formation was icon painting. The main school for the Yakut art was Russian icon painting tradition, mainly that of Moscow and Novgorod schools of the 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries (themes of Theophany, icon painting patterns of the Tender Feeling and the Sign, colour symbolism).

The second stage is associated with the emergence of proper national art of the Republic of Yakutia **(1910-1940)**.

Regarding the preconditions of the Yakut art formation, it is evident that the development of the Yakut art school is based on Russian cultural tradition. It is evident not only from the joint works of visiting Russian icon painters with the Yakut masters, but also from the fact that the first Yakut painters, Ivan Vasilyevich Popov (1873-1945) and Mikhail Mikhailovich Nosov (1887-1960), were descendants of local Russian residents. Moreover, I.V. Popov, just like all the following professional artists, was educated at a Russian school, at the private studio of A.V. Makovsky, professor of High College of Art of Saint Petersburg Academy of Art.

Obviously, Russian origin and Russian art school left their mark in the works of painters belonging to the “initial” stage of Yakut visual art development. For example, the space of the painting “Yakutsk of the Late 17<sup>th</sup> Century” by I.V. Popov (1928) depicts a fortification with



Fig. 1. Popov I.V. Yakutsk of the Late 17th Century. 1928



Fig. 2. Nosov M.M. In a Poor Man's Yurt. 1936

some watchtowers, resembling a Russian ostrog (fortress), an architectural construction typical for Russia of the 13 – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

At the second stage (1910-1940) of its development the Yakut art school gets less dependent on the Russian cultural influence. It obtains the features of a national, independent, separate school. The artists who developed the national trend in visual art were painters and graphic artists M.M. Nosov and I.D. Izbekov (1909-1996). The works of these painters were not determined by the classical art education limits. Both of them were self-taught. M.M. Nosov engaged himself in independent research of the Yakut ethnography, at the same time studying at the High Liberal Workers' School in Saint Petersburg. Returning to Yakutia, he began his teaching career simultaneously with

painting. In the year 1915, with the assistance of E.M. Yaroslavsky, who managed the Yakut Museum of Regional Studies from 1950 until 1917, the first art exhibition displaying the artist's works "Yakut Still Life", "The Ancient Settler Say-Sary", "Yakut Woman and Tungus Woman" was organized. The exhibition gave a great push to the national art. The peculiarity of works by M.M. Nosov and I.D. Izbekov is their authors' desire to depict the uniqueness of the Yakut ethnical culture. The artists turn to the motives characterizing the Yakut culture: folk customs and traditions, yurts as national dwelling of the ethnocultural group, traditional crafts and everyday routine objects. For example, the most typical of their paintings are: "In a Poor Man's Yurt" (1936), "Yakut Still Life" (1942), "Ancient Yakut Dance" (1946) by M.M. Nosov;

“Kolkhoz Flock” (1947), “Horse Racing” (1951), “The Herd” (1959), “In the Tundra” (1963) by I.D. Izbekov.

One of the first painters to make a contribution into the formation of the professional Yakut art was Petr Petrovich Romanov (1902-1952). He was the first national painter to be recognized as “the emblem of the Yakut visual arts” (Timofeeva, 2006, p.33). Petr Petrovich was one of the organizers of the Yakut painters’ association in the late 1930-s – early 1940-s and the founder of the Yakut School of Arts. In the year 1945, upon the artist’s incentive, the Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic “On Opening a School of Arts in the City of Yakutsk” No.233 dated 02.04.45 declared the foundation of the Yakut School of Arts. Since that time, the Yakut painters had the opportunity to develop their skills on the professional level. This was the beginning of a new stage in the Yakut visual art development, the stage based on professional approach to creating visual art objects.

The third stage of the Yakut visual art development is connected to the development of professional art school (1950-s – 1980-s).

The 1950-s were the years when the first graduates left the walls of the Yakut art school; many of them continued their education at various educational institutions of the country. In the 1960-s the Yakut art experienced a significant rise connected with the arrival of a large group of talented artists educated in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities of the Soviet Union. This was when the basic painting genres were shaped. The artists worked in such genres, as portrait (S.L. Alexandrov, M.V. Lukin, A.N. Osipov, L.A. Kim etc.), landscape (E.M. Krylov, N.M. Zasimov, A.P. Sobakin, N.G. Sirotkin, V.G. Petrov, A.N. Osipov etc.), genre painting (A.N. Osipov, E.I. Vasilyev, F.S. Zhegusov, I.E. Kapitonov, M.V. Lukin, N.A. Pavlov etc.).

The genre system provided the artists with wider range of tools for expressing their ideas, connected with the Yakut culture, in their artistic works.

In the mid 1970-s the genre painting occupied a prominent place in the painting system. In this type of painting such artists of the 1970-s – 1980-s, as A.N. Osipov, E.I. Vasilyev, I.E. Kapitonov, M.V. Lukin and others strived to convey the sophisticated spiritual world of the Yakut person, to depict the ethnical peculiarities of the Yakut life. Taking up the heritage of the first generation artists (1920-1940-s), one of the first Yakut Art School graduates (1950), and later the graduate of painting department of V.S. Surikov Moscow State Art Institute (D.K. Moschalsky studio, 1956), Mikhail Vasilyevich Lukin (born 1929) turns to genre painting to convey the values of the Yakut traditional occupations. He creates his paintings with the impressions from his trips around the North Polar regions. These are such paintings, as “In the Kolyma Valley” (1957), “Reindeer Racing” (1961), “On the Way” (1962), “Meeting Along the Way”, “The Indigirka Fishermen” (1963) etc. The etudes, drafts and paintings of this cycle affirm the original Yakut concept of living.

The portrait genre was preferred by S.L. Alexandrov (“Portrait of Reindeer Breeder N. Kurilov”, 1966), L.A. Kim (“Portrait of the Honoured Artist of YASSR M.V. Zhirkov”, 1962), V.G. Petrov, I.E. Kapitonov, Z.K. Kurchatova and others, who chose to visualize certain personalities of the Yakut lands. Here we also observe the artists’ interest to personality, let it be historical or contemporary, and to the artist himself. At this stage of the Yakut visual art development various types of portraits were formed: children’s portrait, self-portrait, representative and chamber portraits. All of them manifest a peculiar trait of ethnocultural character of the Yakut: the self-value of each person, regardless of its social

status. Each representative of the Yakut ethnos is equally significant and valuable.

Therefore, the 1950 – 1980-s of the history of the Yakut visual art development are characterized by formation of the Yakut art school on the professional level. Such development manifested itself in shaping up the genre system of painting, which enabled the artists to visualize different aspects of the ethnos' life in their works of art.

The fourth stage of the Yakut visual art development is the modern period of the Yakut visual art development (1990 – 2000-s).

Since the year 1990, which means, since the declaration of state sovereignty of Yakutia, a new, different stage of visual art development begins; this stage is mainly associated with the appearance of new generation artists, free from the traditions of the previous decades, therefore, contributing new methods of expressing the ethnos' world outlook into their art. In the year 1993, the new generation created an artistic association "Flogiston": the name for it, translated from Greek, means "combustible, flammable". The association was created upon the incentive of M.V. Khandu, O.A. Rakhleeva, O.A. Skorikova, S.V. Ivanova with the support of their allies from the Yakutia Artists' Union: A.L. Sorgoeva, E.K. Atalaso, G.E. Okoimova, I.A. Mekumianova, N.E. Fedulova, L.L. Popova, T.E. Shaposhnikova, Zh.P. Khungeeva, E.P. Romanova. In different years, the union was also joined by I.E. Kapitonov, V.S. Parnikov, E.P. Savvin, A.D. Vasilyev, G.N. Reshetnikov, M.G. Starostin (Lutsenko, 2011). The majority of "Flogistoners" got the diplomas of professional education at art institutes of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Krasnoyarsk, Vladivostok. "Flogiston" is not a homogenous art stream. It gathered different creative individuals, free thinking personalities with different life, art and professional experience. All artists of the association work in different styles, let it be abstractionism, realism, primitivism. They all

perceive themselves not only as representatives of the Yakut art, but as a part of the universal art union of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It created their desire to get rid of regional boundaries and to use art for expressing themselves in the issues urgent for the modern humankind. Their striving for a cultural dialogue brought the Yakut artists to participating in both Russian and foreign exhibitions. In the year 2008, in Yakutsk, a modern Yakut art exhibition was opened under a symbolic name "Koleso" ("The Wheel"). As an exhibition name, in many cases, reflects its contents, in this situation we may also speak of the meaning hidden in the title chosen for the event. In its symbolic meaning, a wheel stands for the idea of eternal movement of the universe. This is the main idea of works by Andrei Chikachev, Marianna Lukina, Anna Osipova, D'ulustan Boytunov, Semion Prokopyev, the participants of the exhibition. In the year 2009 another exhibition of graphic, painting and applied art by the Yakut artist was opened in the Polish city of Gdansk. The exhibition presented works by ten Yakut artists well-known in Russia. Among them there are: Andrei Chikachev, Olga Skorikova, Evdokia Romanova, Mikhail Starostin and Tuyaara Shaposhnikova. In 2011, an exhibition of the Yakut artists was organized within the framework of modern art exhibition "International Artexpo 2011", held in the USA, in order to popularize the indigenous painting of this multinational Northern region. It displayed some paintings by Andrei Chikachev, copper-plate engravings by Mikhail Starostin, collages by Valery Bessonov, nude-art by Mikhail Simonov. In the same year, in Moscow, the art exhibition "The Olonkho Land-2011", presenting the uniqueness of the Yakut lands, was opened. Since 2008 and until present time "ARkT-Navigation" project, for artists to represent the modern art of the Sakha Republic, has been held. Often artists gather into unions, creating works under the same idea. In the year

2014, exhibition “The Lena River. Ayaansuola” of the Yakut artists N.V. Nikolaeva (born 1964) and T.E. Shaposhnikova (born 1967) was held at the Urals, Siberia and the Far East branch of Krasnoyarsk Russian Art Academy. Their works are united under the same philosophic idea of way, expressed by motives based on ethnic peculiarities of the nations, resident in the Republic of Yakutia.

This way, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the Yakut art strives to integrate into the common cultural space of the world more than ever. At the same time, entering the universal process of cultural development did not result in a loss of national originality of the Yakut art school. On the opposite, getting beyond the boundaries of the republic territory helped the artists to actualize the significance of the cultural values of their nation, ethnos, and culture as a whole. The works by the Yakut artists fits the typical tendency of modern regional art, concerning the artistic and philosophic self-expression within conventionally symbolic forms of ethnic conscience.

### **3. Works by the Yakut painters as a cultural and semiotic space for representation of ethnocultural values**

This paragraph is dedicated to cultural and semiotic analysis of visual art works by the Yakut artists. The target of the analysis is to reveal the strategies of constructing indigenous Northern ethnicity in the symbolic “field” of national art. The empiric base for the research is the paintings created by the Yakut artists throughout the whole period of the Yakut art school development (1930-2010-s). Let us emphasize, that the major attention was concentrated not on the time of creating this or that piece, but on its meaningful part, sign and semiotic forms, the analysis of which allowed the author to systematize works of art according to their representation of ethnocultural values. By “ethnocultural values” we understand such

secondary constructs which symbolically bring the artist and the viewer back to their roots, to their original cultural traditions.

The first block consists of the works embodying the *spiritual world outlook fundament of the Yakut nation*. These are works of art with sign and semiotic forms representing religious rituals, typical of the Yakut culture. As a rule, they depict the motives of magical manipulations performed by a shaman, the bearer and protector of the national religion, shamanism; the motives associated with traditions and customs, kept by representatives of the Yakut ethnos, and the motives dedicated to natural elements. Representatives of this group are works by M.M. Lukina “Triptych Ysyakh” (1993), “The Desired Coast” (1998), M. Khandy “Shaman Speaking to Spirits” (1996), N.V. Nikolaev “The Shaman” (2000), M.M. Nosov “Ancient Yakut Dance” (1946), K.P. Gavrilyev “Algys” (1997), A.A. Osipova “Northern Celebration” (2010), T.E. Shaposhnikova “Ysyakh” (2012) and others.

The artistic space of painting “The Desired Coast” by M.M. Lukina (1998) presents the major ritual of shamanism, “kamlanie” (shamanistic ritual).

On the basis of traditional world outlook of shamanism religion, we may interpret the character, sitting in the left corner of “The Desired Coast”, as a shaman, holding a tambourine – a musical instrument, used as an integral “tool” of “kamlanie” ritual. The silhouettes of the shaman’s body copy the semi-circle of the tambourine, thereby conveying the idea of the shaman’s merging with the tambourine sounds. This way he is depicted absorbed into the shaman mystery state. According to the Yakut beliefs, during ritual the Yakut shamans would call a series of their personal assistant spirits besides their protector spirits. A part of such mythological characters is usually described as “invisible people”. In the analysed work of art, the figure, dancing by the



Fig. 3. Lukina M.M. The Desired Coast. 1998



Fig. 4. Khandy M. Shaman Speaking to Spirits. 1996

side of the shaman, may also be interpreted as an artistic way to express the inner state of the shaman as ecstasy, flying across the worlds of the Universe. There is no coincidence that the female figure is depicted with her arms wide open, as though imitating the flight of a bird.

Works by M. Khandy represents a different artistic language in depicting the major ethnic religion, shamanism. It is the language of symbols, of “prehistoric” signs expressing the talks of the Yakut spiritual culture bearer, the shaman, with the senior creatures. The authors thereby

emphasize the external characteristics of this religious ritual, underlining the spiritual element, the basis of shamanism, as all the processes typical of this cult are usually performed at the spiritual level, invisible for the eyes. Here the symbol language acts as the most acceptable form of expressing spiritual values of the national Yakut religion.

Triptych by M.M. Lukina is created to express the world outlook ideas of the Yakut concerning their connection to the Tree of Life. In the artistic space of the left part of the triptych we can see





Fig. 5, 6. Lukina M.M. Triptych Ysyakh. Left part. The Old Man; Central part. The Birch. 1993



Fig. 7. Nosov M.M. The Ancient Yakut Dance. 1946



Fig. 8. Osipova A.A. The Northern Celebration. 2010

the ritual process of tying a rope around a tree trunk, which was a part of celebrating Ysyakh (traditional Yakut New Year celebration). In the central part of the triptych there is a hanging pillar with a rope tied around it. Symbolically, it expresses the idea of connection between the ethnos and the axis of the Tree of Life, the sacred centre, around which the ethnos performs its ritual round dance at the Ysyakh celebration.

A different aspect of the religious ritual is presented in works by M.M. Nosov (“The Ancient

Yakut Dance”, 1946) and A.A. Osipova (“The Northern Celebration”, 2010).

The artists turn to the wide-spread Yakut round dance called *osuokhay*. According to the Yakut, their ritual dances are the cultural phenomena intended to adapt to the natural environment and protect the people from its evil powers. By performing the round dance, the people clear their sacred space from the filth of Chaos and model a new, pure space. Moreover, the round dance was considered to possess a

magical ability to reach the distant “alien” world. And if the work of M.M. Nosov presents, more likely, the moment of inner concentration of the dancers on the ritual they are about to perform (the characters are depicted as static, looking inside the circle), then in the artistic space of “The Northern Celebration” by A.A. Osipova the characters are dancing and moving. The sign and symbolic forms of the painting express, therefore, the idea of motion, eternal circulation of life.

The artistic space of painting “Algys” by K.P. Gavrilyev presents characters performing the ritual of blessing, addressing to the presiding deities. The compulsory symbol of this ritual, according to the Yakut beliefs, is the fire, representing the spirit of nature, an intermediary between people and gods. It is a custom of the Yakut ethnos to feed and treat fire, which is a sign of begging gods for prosperity. It is no coincidence that the sign forms of the painting represent three characters, marching one after another; two of them are carrying vessels, which is a sign of performing the traditional ritual of sacrifice to the spirit of fire. The figure of a white horse in the upper part of the composition takes up less space

on the canvas than the characters engaged in the ritual. The horse is depicted walking in the same direction as the characters, which characterizes it as a protector horse, accompanying people on their way of bringing gifts to gods, asking for blessing. The sacredness of the depicted scene is enhanced by using the technique of icon painting, which is creation of a plain image. Therefore, the cultural and semiotic forms of the painting (fire, vessels, marching, horse) embody the religious world outlook of the Yakut ethnos, which is based on the tight bond between the people and the gods.

The relation to nature, and the Lena River in particular, which acts as a “character” in many paintings of the Yakut painters, is of the same significance for the Yakut ethnos. The whole history of the Yakut is closely connected to this great River. It is worshipped, it is glorified, named *Itiller Ebybit* – the Life-Giving Foremother. It is associated with the feminine, maternal element of natural power, of the whole Universe, creating life and giving it to all the creatures. According to legends, it was the River Lena on which the forefather of the Sakha people *Ellei* came to their



Fig. 9. Gavrilyev K.P. Algys. 1997



Fig. 10. Nikolaeva N.V. Triptych "The Lena River": Winter. Ice Drift; Spring; Summer. 2010-2013 (titles of paintings listed from left to right, correspondingly). Photo by N.N. Seredkina



Fig. 11. Lukin M.V. Indigirka Fishermen. 1963

lands. One of the typical works dedicated to the theme of nature is triptych "The Lena River" by N.V. Nikolaeva (2010-2013). The triptych consists of paintings "Summer", "Ice Drift. Spring", "Winter".

The second group of works is represented by paintings with the sign and semiotic forms embodying the *idea of way, the road of life human walks along*. The idea is expressed through depiction of motives associated with the traditional working chores of the Yakut. As a rule, those are narrative paintings. Representatives of this group are paintings by I.D. Izbekov "The Kolkhoz Flock" (1947), M.V. Lukin "Indigirka Fishermen" (1963), N.M. Zosimov "To the Road" (1987), cycles by A.A. Osipova "Way of Life" (2010), "The North" (2010) etc.

The artistic space of the painting "Indigirka Fishermen" (1963) presents a group of fishermen, pulling their fishing nets. The fishermen are depicted as one whole. They are united by the general determination, orientation into the depth of the artistic space of the painting, a common burden, a common target. In their colours, the figures of the characters wearing warm-toned clothes, contrast with the artistic space of the painting, which is the cold mountain landscape. Moreover, the contrast is reached by a special composition technique. The vertical lines constituting the figures of the characters are opposed to the horizontal lines visually forming the clouds and the crack on the ice. Such compositional opposition expresses the idea of confrontation, struggle between

human and nature elements. It is a hard way the human goes through during his life. There is no coincidence that the characters are depicted in a “stepping” posture, pulling the heavy burden of their fishing net. In this way of life the human has to be strong-hearted. The idea is supported by the fact that the characters of “Indigirka Fishermen” are presented in the background of a rock, the power, endurance and hardness of which is extrapolated on the spiritual features of the human and the ethnos as a whole. Moreover, a great significance in revealing the ethnocultural element of the Yakut ethnos belongs to the tendency of putting winter as a distinctive element of any painting’s artistic space of. Winter is the season which requires certain spiritual effort to bear this most severe and long period of life. Therefore, the artistic space of the painting represents the idea of spiritual strength of the people living under severe conditions of the Extreme North.

One of the main characters of paintings by the Yakut artists is a reindeer. The Yakut, just like many other peoples, think of a reindeer as a sacred animal. It is glorified as the most valuable pray. However, the reindeer cult had more than hunting and reindeer-breeding significance in the life of the Yakut. Due to

annual renovation of its horns, reindeer became a symbol of renovation, revival, fertility of human and nature as a whole. In one word, all life of people living in the North is connected to this animal.

In paintings by A.A. Osipova reindeer is depicted close to human (silhouettes of the animal cross with the silhouettes of the characters, paint strokes are of the same, cold tones). Closeness to human ascribes a characteristic of a companion to this animal. Significance of reindeer as an animal with a special status recognized by the Yakut is enhanced by the fact, that frequently reindeer is the only character in the artists’ paintings. A typical example is diptych “Reindeer” by N.V. Nikolaeva (2013). The artist turns to depicting the sacred animal using certain symbolic signs. It is a specific way of communication with the viewer, forcing him to pay attention to the sacral functions of this animal.

The third block is formed by paintings of portrait genre. This genre was preferred by S.L. Alexandrov (“Portrait of Reindeer Breeder N. Kurilov”, 1966), M.N. Innokentyev “Portrait of a Hunter” (2005), L.A. Kim (“Portrait of the Honoured Artist of YASSR M.V. Zhirkov”, 1962), F.G. Makarov “At the Reindeer Breeders of Oymyakon” (2003), A.N. Osipov “National



Fig. 12, 13. Osipova A.A. Cycles “The Way of Life”; “The North”. 2010



Fig. 14, 15. Nikolaeva N.V. Diptych “Reindeer”. 2013. Photo by N.N. Seredkina



Fig. 16. A.N. Osipov “National Writers of Yakutia: N.E. Mordvinov (Amma Aggylyya), V.M. Novikov (Kiunniuk-Urastyrov), S.R. Kulachikov (Elley), D.K. Sivtsev (Suorun Omollon)”, 1974

Writers of Yakutia: N.E. Mordvinov (Amma Aggylyya), V.M. Novikov (Kiunniuk-Urastyrov), S.R. Kulachikov (Elley), D.K. Sivtsev (Suorun Omollon)”, 1974), Yu. Spiridonov “The Master of the Mom Mountains” (2007), V.G. Petrov, I.E. Kapitonov, Z.K. Kurchatova, N.P. Nikolaeva and others. Having analysed portraits by the Yakut painters, we may outline the following types: self-portraits, children’s portraits, historical portraits and contemporary portraits (those of relatives, representatives of a certain craft, such as hunters, reindeer breeders,

storytellers). Thus, sign and semiotic forms of portraits embody certain types of representatives of the Yakut ethnos, who follow the traditions of their culture, thereby deserving the status of “cultural heroes”. This big interest towards the genre of portrait may be interpreted as a wish to demonstrate, that every personality of the ethnos is valuable and significant, notwithstanding the social status.

One of the distinctive works in the genre of portrait is a painting by A.N. Osipov “National Writers of Yakutia” (1974).



The artistic space of the painting depicts writers, representatives of the Yakut creative intelligentsia, sitting in front of a tree trunk, in the middle of a wide meadow. Compositionally the artistic space consists of several plains, which creates the visual effect of the foreground and background on different levels. As a result, the foreground space brings the character up, above the plain surrounding them, thereby ascribing them with the characteristics of unique, outstanding persons. They are depicted motionless and quiet; there is no eye contact between them. Every one of the writers is turned in upon himself, meditating. They are creators who make up the images of the Yakut lands, forming the spiritual element of the Yakut ethnos. The characters are sitting at the base of a tree trunk: the sign interpreted as a special mission of creative people: to serve as a base for spiritual development of the Yakut culture.

The fourth group is composed by works of still life genre. Many artists preferred working in the genre of still life. Among them there are: M.M. Nosov, S.L. Germogenova, A.S. Innokentyeva, M.M. Lukina, N.V. Nikolaeva, A.V. Chikachev, T. Shaposhnikova and others. Sign and semiotic forms of still life paintings by the Yakut painters depict the *things that bear special significance*

*for the ethnos*. On one hand, these are the things traditionally used for religious acts and rituals, such as ritual kumis vessels (“chorons”), a compulsory attribute of Ysyakh celebration. On the other hand, these are everyday life objects, used in handicrafts.

A different aspect of still life is manifested by the modern Yakut painter T.E. Shaposhnikova. In the artistic space of her paintings certain things acquire a form of schematic silhouettes. One of the major artistic techniques used by the painter is geometrism. Often the still life objects are deprived of a contour, merging with the plain background or drifting into a different form. This artistic technique brings the viewer to participate in constructing the artistic appearance of this or that object.

The technique of dissolving the boundaries of one form in another may be interpreted in the context of the modern tendencies observed in the society today. The world of a big pluralistic society acts as an integrated space of common culture, where there is no place for strict boundaries between nations. The language of a work of art, therefore, expresses the modern tendency of interpreting micro-cultures (indigenous peoples’ cultures) in the space of a macro-culture. It is worthwhile mentioning, that such a tendency of shifting from certain forms to abstractionism



Fig. 17. Lukina M.M. Yakut Still Life with Chorons and Scales. 1998.



Fig. 18. Nikolaeva N.V. Needlework Accessory Boxes of Birch Bark. 2013. Photo by N.N. Seredkina



Fig. 19, 20. Shaposhnikova T.E. Still Life. 2006; Still Life with a Red Apple. 2013. Photo by N.N. Seredkina

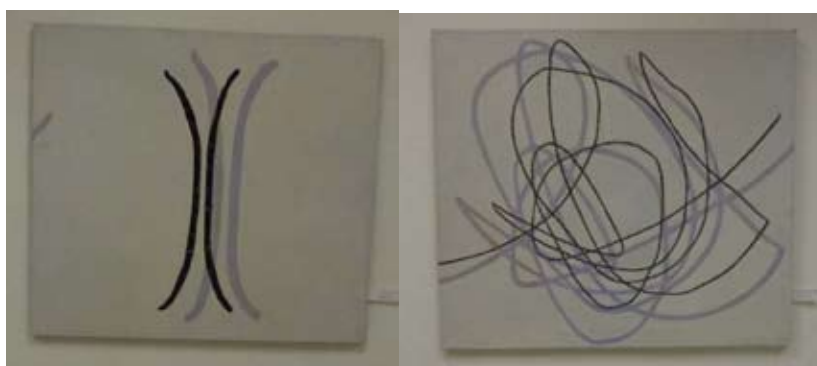


Fig. 21, 22. Nikolaeva N.V. Diptych “Chaut”. 2008. Photo by N.N. Seredkina

becomes a distinctive feature of the modern Yakut painting. One of the typical works is diptych by N.V. Nikolaeva.

In the artistic space of diptych “Chaut” by N.V. Nikolaeva the main “character” is a line. Line is the form, the artistic sign through which the artist expresses the meaning of life process, its temporal flows, which do exist, though intangible for human. According to N.V. Nikolaeva, “all temporal flows pass into one another, creating forms”. These temporal flows are the past and the present, closely co-existing in the modern life of ethnocultures. The past as a cultural tradition acts as a base for modern culture. It is reviewed and re-adapted to the context of a modern person’s world outlook, to the experience of world artistic culture as a whole.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a result of cultural and semiotic analysis of development dynamics of the Yakut art school and works of art created by the Yakut artists, the following conclusions concerning the strategies of constructing indigenous Northern ethnicity in the symbolic “field” of art can be made.

1. The Yakut art school is a well-developed school with its history, constellation of national artists, therefore possessing the capacity to represent and construct the priority values of this ethnocultural group.

2. A distinctive feature of the Yakut art is the tendency to develop within the general stream of art history. Painters follow the traditions accepted in the world artistic society (Russian icon painting tradition, genre system, working techniques). These are the canons that have

become a fundament for professional national art development.

3. Active participation of national artists in various exhibitions witnesses the openness of the Yakut art school to the world community. The artists do not only organize the exhibitions of their works within their regions, but take active part in the events organized on the international level. Besides exhibition activity, we remark the practice of creating artist unions (N.V. Nikolaeva, T.E. Shaposhnikova), issuing catalogues with the reproductions of national art works. In one word, the Yakut artist society is not isolated from the outside globalizing world; on the opposite, it is open for a dialogue of cultures.

4. Analysis of paintings created by the Yakut artists throughout the whole history of the Yakut art development has proved, that construction of indigenous Northern ethnicity is associated with the use of shapes, cultural sign systems in the form of traditional ethnocultural values, materialized in paintings and enriched with the whole experience of world art culture through review and readjustment to the modern world context.

5. Works by the Yakut painters were brought into a system according to the revealed ethnocultural values. We outlined the following blocks of paintings:

- paintings with sign and semiotic systems embodying the spiritual outlook fundament of the Yakut;
- paintings actualizing the idea of the way, road of life a human walks along;
- paintings representing certain types of Yakut ethnos representatives;
- paintings with sign and semiotic forms that draw the viewer's attention to the things that bear special significance in the Yakut Culture. As G.W.V. Hegel rightfully remarked, "...through this ideality, art at the same time *exalts* these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves; it directs our attention to what otherwise we would pass by without any notice" (Hegel, 1968, p.172).

6. Of greatest interest are the modern Yakut art works, distinctive for abstracting from certain forms to geometrism and abstractionism. This technique, as a new language of communication with the viewer, fixes the tendency of reviewing the universal artistic culture in the ethnical culture context. Such neo-folklore wave creates a specific rescript, merging the modern painting tendencies with the ethnical memory.

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## **Культурно-семиотические стратегии конструирования индигенной северной этничности в искусстве (на примере якутской художественной школы)**

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*В статье исследуются культурно-семиотические стратегии конструирования индигенной северной этничности в искусстве на основе изучения динамики развития якутской художественной школы и анализа живописных произведений мастеров данной школы. Определена специфика каждого из периодов становления якутского искусства, выявлена тенденция развития национальной школы в русле общего потока истории искусства. Предложена авторская систематизация живописных произведений якутских художников. Произведения сгруппированы по тематике изображения. Это картины, культурно-семиотические формы которых воплощают духовную мировоззренческую основу якутов; произведения, репрезентирующие идею пути, дороги жизни, по которой идет человек; портреты, визуальные образы которых представляют определенные типы культурных героев; натюрморты, которые по своей жанровой специфике репрезентируют особо значимые для якутской культуры вещи. Отмечен вектор развития современного якутского искусства, направленный на переосмысление и адаптацию этнической памяти народа к новому контексту глобализирующегося мира.*

*Ключевые слова:* культурно-семиотические стратегии, конструирование, индигенная северная этничность, национальное искусство, якутское изобразительное искусство, якутские художники, якутская художественная школа, этнокультурные ценности.

*Научная специальность:* 24.00.00 – культурология, 17.00.00 – искусствоведение.

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